DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 339 038 CS 213 081

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TITLE The Language and Educational Needs of College Students Who Speak African-American English.
PUB DATE 7 Nov 91
NOTE 9p.; Paper presented at the Meeting of the Alabama Association for Developmental Education (Birmingham, AL, November 7, 1991).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Black Dialects; *Black Students; *College Students; Higher Education; Language Role; *Language Usage; *Nonstandard Dialects; *Standard Spoken Usage; Student Needs
IDENTIFIERS *African Americans

ABSTRACT

Many linguists, sociologists, and educators see the nonstandard form of speech used by African-American students as a substandard, imperfect copy of Standard English (SE), marred by a number of careless and ignorant errors, rather than as something to be studied and understood in its own right. Many African-American college students continue to exhibit nonstandard English patterns after 12 years of education. Public education has refused to see African-American English (AAE) as a legitimate form and has not developed methods to teach African-American students SE. Common phonological problems of speakers of AAE involve consonant substitutions and word misarticulations such as "ax" for "ask." The Conference on College Composition and Communication (a part of the National Council of Teachers of English) adopted a resolution of "Students' right to their own language," to which many African-American students would quickly agree. There has been only a small amount of research published about the emerging phonology of AAE speaking students. The time has come for all teachers of African-American students to seek the help they need in order to prepare these students to meet the demands of society, by guiding them into a new dialect suitable for social mobility and vocational success. (Sixteen references are attached.) (RS)

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THE LANGUAGE AND EDUCATIONAL NEEDS OF COLLEGE STUDENTS WHO SPEAK AFRICAN-AMERICAN ENGLISH

by

Elizabeth H. Fitts

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The quality of education in any setting is related to the quality of men and women who serve in the school systems. The professionals themselves exercise subtle controls over education, and the importance of effective teachers should not be underestimated.

The school experience was established to prepare the young to assume society's responsibilities. Although much change has taken place, society still allows schools to exist for this purpose. The fundamental mission of American schools, according to Ysseldyke and Algozzine (1982), is the education of ALL students.

American education has always been concerned with nonstandard English. Linguists, sociologists, and educators have been investigating nonstandard dialects, particularly varieties of African-American English (AAE), for the past 20 years. Complete descriptions of the features of African-American English are readily available in many of our educational journals and books (Labov, 1970; Baratz, 1970; Shuy, 1969; Jensen, 1969; Bereiter & Englemann, 1966; Dillard, 1972; Smitherman, 1981). However, this concern and some of these descriptions have been the object to overcome rather than something to be studied and understood in its own right. The traditional view is that the nonstandard or substandard form of speech used by African-American students is an imperfect copy of standard English (SE) marred by a number of careless and ignorant errors (Labov, 1978).

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Many of our African-American college students are still exhibiting nonstandard English patterns after twelve years of education. They are not learning the essential skills in elementary and high school that will ultimately guarantee them a reasonable amount of success in college and in the world. They are not only exhibiting what is termed nonstandard English patterns, but their reading and writing skills are years behind the national norms. Research findings (Hawkins & Butts, 1973; Christian & Wolfram, 1979; Harrison & Trabasso, 1976; Robbins, 1979; Wolfran & Christian, 1989) indicate that very little has been done to correct this situation because of society's attitude toward African-American English.

A major goal of public education is to increase a student's social mobility and vocational success. In this it has failed both because it has refused to see AAE as a legitimate form and because it has not developed methods to teach African-American students standard English. Because of this twofold failure, many African-American students never learn standard English in school and thus are essentially denied the economic, social, and vocational success that is the express goal of the school system through its graduates (Hawkins & Butts, 1973). Because their form of English is seen as inferior, and repeated correction does not result in their learning standard English, they are assumed to be retarded in cognitive development and are not expected to achieve. **SO MUCH FOR ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT!** Because they do not learn standard English, and because they are seen as inferior by those who speak standard English, they are denied social mobility. Because they do

not learn standard English, they are automatically disqualified for many good jobs, particularly those involving contact with the public--either face-to-face or over the telephone--eventhough they may be qualified in every other way. **SO MUCH FOR VOCATIONAL SUCCESS!** (Hawkins & Butts, 1973).

Many of our African-American college students are first generation college students who still speak nonstandard English after twelve years of education. Approximately 85% of the students tested exhibit similar phonological problems. The problems most often noted were:

1. /th/ voiceless - this sound is either omitted, substituted, or distorted in the medial and/or final positions. (Examples: wif/with; toofbrush/toothbrush).
2. /th/ voiced - this sound is substituted in the initial and final positions. (Examples: dis/this; de/the; dem/them; smoov/smooth).
3. / shr/ as in shrimp. Substitution of /skr/ or /str/. We hear skrimp or strimp.
4. /str/ as in street. Substitution of /skr/. We hear "I live on Hall skreet".
5. /Skr/ as in scratch. Substitution of /str/. we hear "The cat stratched me".

Other words commonly misarticulated by this population of students are:

1. Ask is pronounced Ax
2. library - is pronounced liberry
3. get - is pronounced get

4. think and thank or often misused. (Example: I thank that's right).
5. children - is pronounced chirren
6. Dropping of the vocalic schwa which represent /r/ in four. AAE speakers tend to drop it (fo' o'clock)
7. Deletion of middle /l/ (Example: help become hep).

These are only a few of the phonological patterns exhibited by AAE speaking college students. There are many others that can't be covered in the narrow focus of this paper. However, something must be done to assist these students in becoming proficient in the language that they are expected to master.

In many instances, these students are being penalized for their inability to speak SE. They often share their stories of disappointment at not being able to find summer employment, of being embarrassed in front of the class by instructors when errors in pronunciation are made, an about the difficulty they seem to have passing a series of required reading and English courses.

Some instructors feel that AAE interferes with a student's ability to comprehend oral and written SE. AAE users do acquire receptive control . . . though they may never change the way they speak (Goodman and Buck, 1973).

STUDENTS' RIGHT TO THEIR OWN LANGUAGE

The Conference on College Composition and Communication (a part of the National Council of Teachers of English), adopted a resolution of "Students' right to their own language":

> We affirm the students' right to their own patterns and varieties of language--the dialects of their nurture or whatever dialects in which they find their own identify and style. Language scholars long ago denied that the myth of a standard American dialect has any validity. The claim that any one dialect is unacceptable amounts to an attempt of one social group to exert its dominance over another. Such a claim leads to false advice for speakers and writers, and immoral advice for humans. A nation proud of its diverse heritage and its cultural and racial variety will preserve its heritage of dialects. We affirm strongly that teachers must have the experience and training that will enable them to respect diversity and uphold the right of students to their own language. (CCCC Language Statement, 1974. pp. 2-3).

As might be expected, this statement created (and continues to create) considerable controversy. According to Ohanian (1982), the socio-politico-linguistic camp followers argue that there is no such thing as "incorrect" English. What has traditionally been labeled "wrong" is, in their canon, merely "nonstandard". In their articles, the linguists claim that this deviant English is a perfectly legitimate means of communication, one of the many dialects of English, and as such, just a valid as the dialect known as SE.

Many of our African-American students would quickly agree with the Language Statement of CCCC and the thinking of the members of the socio-politico-linguistic camp. They all seem to feel that if they can do the job, then it should not matter how they speak. Some educators and students across the country claim that under the First Amendment to the Constitution, every American has the right to choose the language through which he will communicate. Choice implies alternatives, but only those students who do not intend to become productive citizens can choose to reject SE. Thomas Kochman (1973) and M. Eugene Wiggins (1976) believe that

the main reason for the unemployment and social problems of African Americans is not their lack of competence in SE but the racism of whites. According to them:

> Millions of people in this country today do not speak standard English, and millions of them, if they are white, have very good incomes. But in job-hunting in America, pigmentation is more important than pronunciation. (p.212)

The issue is political, sociological, and economic. In some circles, these noneducational dimensions overshadow all else.

AAE is a controversial issue in the educational arena and much of the literature is focused on describing the nonstandard patterns of these students. There has been only a small amount of research published about the emerging phonology of AAE speaking students. Even fewer investigations have been directed toward ways to assist students in becoming proficient in the language that they are expected to master.

The time has come for all teachers who teach African-American students to seek the help they need in order to prepare these students to meet the demands of society. Perhaps through various workshops and several required college courses, they can obtain a better understanding fo the problem and gain a clearer insight into assisting these students in becoming proficient speakers of SE. This is absolutely necessary because, as educators, we simply must be able to guide these students into a new dialect suitable for social mobility and vocational success.

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